FIFTH EDITION, REVISED.

Can a Man be a Christian on a - Pound a Week?

By J. KEIR HARDIE, M.F.

FOREWORD.

SOME time ago I was invited by the Northern Press Syndicate to write an article on *Can a Man be a Christian on a Pound a Week?* Having complied with the request, in due time the article appeared in various papers in different parts of the country, and excited considerable interest. It led to newspaper correspondence, to personal letters to myself, to sermons from the pulpit, and to requests for its re-publication in pamphlet form. This latter request, I am glad to say, can now be acceded to, the syndicate in question having kindly given the necessary permission. At the end of the article I deal with some of the criticisms to which it gave rise, and which came under my notice. The relationship of Christianity to the Labour Problem is by no means a new subject of discussion, but its importance does not tend to grow any less with the growth of years. In what follows I do not in any way seek to assail Christianity or impugn its teachings. But I cannot accept current theology as being other than a travesty of what Christ taught. The tendency of theology is to magnify the letter of the word, forgetful of the spirit thereof—the very offence for which Jesus denounced the Pharisees so scathingly. My aim is not to denounce, but to quicken; not to lull, but to stimulate. The growing feeling that the solution of all modern problems is to be sought in the application of the principles set forth in the Sermon on the Mount is, to me, full of good promise for the future of the Labour movement, and it is in the hope that what follows may help in this direction that I give it to the public in this form.

Can a Man be a Christian on a Pound a Week?

Behold the fowls of the air; for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your Heavenly Father feedeth them. Are ye not much better than they?

Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin; and yet I say unto you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.

THE ARTICLE.

I AM asked in this article to reply to the above question, and my first impulse is to answer —Certainly. Not only can a man be a Christian on a pound a week, but I do not see how he could possibly be anything else. He might not be much of a theologian, and he could not well be a church-goer, but a Christian he must be.

Let us define the terms we are using.

The man I have in my mind is a fully-matured human being, made in the image of God, who takes an intelligent interest in his own affairs, and in the affairs of the State of which he is a citizen. He works for an employer in some

centre of industry, at some not very skilled form of employment. He is, of course, married, with, say, three children, thus making four persons in all dependent on him for a home, a supply of food, clothing, medical attendance, and holidays. Twenty shillings is the sum out of which his wife—he could not do it—has to provide all these.

A Christian is one who, *inter alia*, takes no thought for the morrow, and who does not lay up for himself treasures upon earth.

In the early days of Christianity asceticism was held to be a logical outcome of Christian belief. Dives was sent to Hades for apparently no other reason than that he was rich. Lazarus went straight to Abraham's bosom because of his earthly poverty. James the Epistolian called upon the rich to weep and howl for the miseries awaiting them in the world to come. Christ sent out His disciples with empty purses, and Himself had not where to lay His head. The Sermon on the Mount is a consistent and powerful argument against property in every form. The Great Teacher understood clearly the difference between life and a mere struggle for existence. If men desired life they might have it in abundance, but only on the condition that they

ABANDONED THE WORSHIP OF MAMMON.

God the Father had so ordained that in response to labour the earth would yield freely enough and to spare for the supply of every human need, and if men would but follow the example of the flowers of the field and the birds of the air and hold all nature's gifts in common, drawing from the great storehouse only what each required for the needs of the day, then life would become free, joyous, and beautiful.

It will be seen, therefore, that the man who is most simple in his tastes, whose life is lived in closest communion with nature, and is farthest removed from the pomps and vanities of worldly display, approximates most nearly to the Christian ideal. Not for him the glare and glitter of the saloon or the haunts of vice; not for him the expensive adornment of gay apparel. His beauty will be that beauty of health which comes from closely following the laws which govern life. The acquisition of property he will regard as an impediment to the development of the soul, which is alone immortal and worth caring for. With Christ there was no wealth save life, and material things were only valuable in so far as they contributed to the production of life.

And now let us return to our

WORKMAN WITH A POUND A WEEK.

Living under a Christian system the purchasing power which twenty shillings a week represents would be amply sufficient for his every need. But the God we worship is Mammon, not Christ, which makes all the difference. In Church life, in literature, in politics, Mammon sits enthroned. We have, therefore, not to consider whether a man can be a Christian on a pound a week, that is, live a life in accordance with the will of God under Christian conditions, but whether he can do so under present conditions. My answer is No. The townsman with a wife and three children and an income of a pound a week dare not "take no thought for the morrow." With the morrow will come the landlord demanding the rent, and if the rent be not forthcoming, out he will go into the street. In London, for the share of a very poor house, he will sometimes have to pay as much as ten

shillings a week—half his income gone at a swoop. In all likelihood the landlord will be a professing Christian, who will sing of the brotherhood of man and the fatherhood of God, and pray that God's will may be done on earth as it is done in Heaven. But this will not hinder him from living an idle luxurious life at the expense of the poor toil-worn workman with his pound a week. The neighbourhood in which the man will be compelled to live, whether in London or some other big industrial centre, will be one in which a healthy life is impossible. He will see his children and his wife suffer from sickness, due in part to lack of decent food, and in part to insanitary surroundings.

HOWEVER MEEK AND MILD HE MAY BE

the human spirit within him will be for ever in revolt against such conditions, and this in itself is fatal to the Christian life. He will see his wife and children poorly clad, insufficiently fed. His employment nine times out of ten will be precarious and intermittent, and each day's loss of work will be so much necessary food kept from his loved ones. At his work he will be treated with less consideration by those in authority than the machinery which, it may be, he tends. There will be no human relationship between him and his employer; a man with a pound a week is simply a hireling of no account, of whom there are thousands willing to take his place should he show the slightest sign of revolt. Not for him the fellowship of the Christian Church. That sacred place is reserved for people who can wear good clothes, pay seat rents, and subscribe to the minister's salary. There are mission halls for a pound-a-week people, where soup, blankets, and coal are to be

had in winter on condition that a man foregoes his manhood. For the funds wherewith to build the hall and provide the soup and blankets and coal will be largely subscribed by the employer who grows rich out of his misery. Under such circumstances it is not difficult to forecast the end. The man feels himself

ENVELOPED IN THE MESHES OF A NET

from which there is no escape. A sense of injustice never leaves him. The present has no joy, the future no hope. And so, bit by bit, his self-respect departs; the dismal surroundings of his home, the poverty of the home itself, the careworn face of his wife and the poor clothing of his children irritate him; he loses heart, faith in man, faith in God. With growing years he finds it ever more difficult to get work. By-and-by some period of unemployment, more prolonged than those through which he has gone overtakes him, and he ceases to struggle, and becomes, in the language of the fashionable slummer, a lapsed mass or a lost soul.

And yet, sodden it may be with drink, foul of speech, and life too unclean for even the dogs to lick his sores, I would sooner risk my chance of getting to heaven with him than with those who, having robbed him and made him what he is, are respectable church-goers and members of good society. He has been sinned against, and not upon him will fall the punishment. Christ had no hard words for the poor erring sons and daughters of men. All his invective was kept for the Scribes and Pharisees, the hypocrites who professed a faith in God which they neither knew nor understood. The outcast, in his lonely broodings and his fits of remorse, will get nearer

to the heart of God than will those who observe all the rites of Christianity but are strangers to its spirit.

The subject is a tempting one. With a pound a week a man might be comfortable, if it brought its full value for him and his dependents. But out of the poor pittance he has to contribute towards the maintenance of a whole host of more or less useless persons and institutions. A great multitude which no man can number are kept, some in affluence, some in comfort, who themselves produce nothing, and who have to be paid by those who produce something. The police force, the army and navy, the law courts—all of them anti-Christian institutions—the landed aristocracy, the plutocracy,

THE STOCK EXCHANGE GAMBLER,

the bookmaker of the race-course, the publican, the loafer, the lawyer, the pick-pocket, the domestic servant, the footman—these are mostly living in idleness, and, as such are a burden upon the industry of the community. And a man with a pound a week has to bear his share of the burden. Out of the wealth which his labour creates he receives but one-third; the total income of the nation is £1,750,000,000 a year, of which the usefully employed wage-earners receive less than £600,000,000. When he comes to spend what he has received more than one-half goes as rent, interest, or profit. He is paid one-third the value of his labour, and when he seeks to lay it out he is robbed of one half its purchasing power, and all this is done by a Christian people. Did the nation own its land and employ its own labour in supplying the needs of the people, it could more than double the production of real wealth, reduce toil to a

mere incident, abolish all poverty, and dethrone the brute god Mammon. Not only so, but the fierce and unending struggle for a living or for wealth which characterises modern life would give place to a kindly brotherhood, wars would cease, and

> The commonsense of most would hold the
> fretful realm in awe
> And the kindly earth would slumber wrapped
> in universal law.

Under such conditions the pound a week man would be living a full life, developing all his faculties in accordance with the laws of his being, and ever rising higher and higher in the scale towards that perfect manhood which is surely the goal of human existence. But, some horrified critic will say, This is Socialism, and Socialism is anti-Christian. Others, however, may find in the picture a realisation of the meaning of the words which they learned at their mother's knee when they were taught to pray, "Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven."

SOME CRITICISMS.

Leaving aside the personal abuse which the publication of the foregoing article brought out, let me deal with the main objections raised against it by the more or less responsible critics. These may be summarised under the following heads:—

1. If the article is right, then the Churches generally do not properly understand what the Gospel of Christ is, and their work is, to a large extent, futile. (Rev. Mr. Shaw).

2. That the teaching of the article is materialistic, and means that if a man has private property he is not a Christian, but that if he owns property in common with others he is. (The same).
3. That in early days of Christianity slaves were set free by their Christian masters. (The same).
4. That the article is an attack upon temperance and thrift, and a glorification of the idle, happy-go-lucky tramp. (Rev. Mr. Hibbert).
5. That Christian employers should pay their workfolks good wages. (Anon).

1. THE CHURCHES AND THE GOSPEL.

If the article is right, then the Churches generally do not properly understand what the Gospel of Christ is, and their work is, to a large extent, futile. (Rev. Mr. SHAW.)

I can imagine how presumptuous it must appear to the clerical mind to find a mere ordinary layman arraying himself against them in matters of theology, and yet a considerable acquaintance with Church life and a sincere desire to understand what Jesus taught has driven me irresistibly to the conclusion that modern Churchianity is not only un-Christian, but anti-Christian. I can find no points of correspondence between the teachings of Jesus, as contained in the New Testament, and the teachings of the modern pulpit. Nor does the life of the average minister of the Gospel differ materially from that of the ordinary man of the world. When the world shouts for war, the pulpit leads the cry. The acquisition of money by the unscrupulous hordes who infest the Stock Exchange is undertaken with the blessing of

the Church. Needless to add, there are many individual cases of exception to this rule, but that it is true of the Church as a whole will scarcely be denied. Every occupant of a pulpit admits the truth of the accusation brought by Jesus against the clerics of His day, and is wont to hurl fiery denunciations at them for being so blinded by spiritual pride as not to see their own faults. In all charity may I point out that, to many, the modern self-satisfied parson, with his string of platitudinous phrases, the meaning of which he has lost in the mists of theology, is the exact prototype of the ancient Pharisee. Christianity to be effective must be a living vital force; not a dead, soulless creed, or a jungle of mere words. The growing despair of the Church at its inability to reach the masses is of itself sufficient proof of my contention. It is also an admission by the Church itself that it is no longer carrying forward the work of its founder, whose mission was to the poor.

2. CHRISTIANITY AND COMMUNISM.

That the teaching of the article is materialistic, and means that if a man has private property he is not a Christian, but that if he holds property in common with others, he is. (Rev. Mr. SHAW.)

The contention here seems to be that it is materialistic to say that the outcome of Christianity is the abolition of private property. A statement of this kind comes with a very bad grace from men who are defending and upholding a system of money-making frankly based on selfishness and greed, and which leads to the glorification of the strong and the unscrupulous over the pure and meek of heart.

In the New Testament, Acts of the Apostles, chapter iv., verses 32 to 35, I read:

> And the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul. Neither said any of them that aught of the things which he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common, And with great power gave the Apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. Neither was there any among them that lacked. For as many as were possessors of land or houses sold them, and brought the prices of the things that were sold, and laid them down at the Apostles' feet. And distribution was made unto every man according as he had need.

Here we have it clearly brought out that the direct outcome of the teachings of Jesus upon those who lived nearest to His time, and who became His followers, was to make them Communists. These early Christians, found it impossible to retain possession of private property after they became Christians, since it raised artificial class distinctions in their midst and prevented the free play of that spirit of fraternal brotherhood which Jesus taught as one of the characteristics of the Kingdom of God. And if that was so in the earlier days of Christianity, it would be equally true of its later days if Christianity were still being preached and practised. What we have in its stead now is a structure of theology built up by priests in whom the spirit of Christ does not dwell. The modern ministry, I repeat, taken in bulk, occupies the same relation to primal Christianity as the Scribes and Pharisees did to the teachings of Moses in the day of Jesus. This, I know, is a strong saying, but these are not the times when men can afford to muffle the truth by wrapping it up in soft words or fine phrases. To lay a charge of materialism against a system which aims at making life everything and the things of life nothing betrays a woeful ignorance of the meaning of the word.

3. CHRISTIANITY AND SLAVERY.

That in the early days of Christianity slaves were set free by their Christian Masters. (Rev. Mr. SHAW).

One of my critics is reported as saying:—

In the early ages (of the Christian era) thousands of slaves were liberated, not by such acts as that of our Government when it paid lump sums for the emancipation of slaves in our colonies, but by the operation of those principles of righteousness and love which are inherent in Christianity.

Exactly so. In the early days of Christianity, whilst yet it remained a power to move the hearts and consciences of men, slave-owners felt that they had no right to keep human beings as private property, and consequently restored them to freedom. In these later days, however, Christian Englishmen, under the teachings of the modern Church, found it quite compatible with their Christian principles to refuse to give freedom to their slaves without solid monentary compensation. Here we have it clearly shown that Christianity is no longer the power it formerly was, and that, I submit, not because of any defect in Christianity itself, but because its professed teachers have lost the meaning of their message, and consequently speak without effect. The effect of private property in land and capital is in all essential respects the same as was the effect of private property in human beings. In each case slavery is the result. The form may have changed, but the substance remains.

4. THRIFT v. TRAMPS.

That the article is an attack upon temperance and thrift, and a glorification of the idle, happy-go-lucky tramp. (Rev. Mr. HIBBERT.)

Needless to say to those who have read the article, this is a travesty of what I wrote. The

point of my argument is that in the Sermon on the Mount the message underlying the words is that every form of private accumulation of this world's goods is a hindrance to the development of the Man, since the more he accumulates the more are his thoughts diverted from life itself to the things of life, until the things become more important than the life, whereas, in the Kingdom of God there will be no need for this distraction, since, as in the case of the birds and the flowers, there will be abundance for all in the common store, and thus all cause for anxiety concerning food and raiment will be removed. The system which compels a man to accept one pound a week, and thereby condemns him to a poor, stunted, narrow, dwarfed existence, is an anti-Christian system, where it is no more possible for men to be Christians than it is for a shark to swim in the air or an eagle to fly through the earth. Character is, in the end, conditioned by environment. In every set of circumstances individuals are to be found greater than their surroundings, else would progress come to a full halt; but a community is, and always must be, what its circumstances and surroundings make it. To condemn men to poverty or to a "struggle for existence" is to murder their souls and finally kill off their bodies prematurely. As for thrift, much which passes for such at present is little different from soul-destroying parsimony. Men and women starve their years of healthy activity that they may have enough to keep alive an attenuated old age scarcely worth preserving. Thrift or economy, properly understood, is not saving, but the proper husbanding of adequate resources. Waste is at all times sinful. The man who wastes his life that he may save money is the greatest spendthrift of all. Under Socialism, which is the application to industry of the teach-

ings contained in the Sermon on the Mount, the entire nation, every individual that is, will be interested in promoting true economy, and he who wastes any portion of what will be the common store will be accounted an enemy of society. Then, too, things will begin to be seen in their true proportions. With the power which the possession of wealth gives one man over his fellows, and the fear which the prospect of poverty brings with it, alike taken away, men will be valued in proportion to what they are and not what they have, and a moral standard of excellence will again be raised for the guidance of the race. Concerning the poor despised tramp, I am prepared to stake my own chances of a seat on the banks of the Jordan that a bigger percentage of these will find entrance to the Kingdom than will be found from the anointed ones who look down so unctuously upon him from the superior height of a classical education and an assured income.

5. THE CHRISTIAN EMPLOYER SHOULD PAY GOOD WAGES.

That Christian employers should pay their workfolks good wages. (ANON.)

Those who reason after this fashion must surely have forgotten their studies in political economy. In a system of industry where prices for the products of labour are fixed by competition, it is the hard skin-flint employer who decides the rate of pay for the trade. Let me illustrate this. *A* is a good employer, albeit a roystering, swearing fellow, who believes in the maxim of live and let live; *B* is a church-goer, and a close-fisted preacher of thrift. Both are engaged in the same trade and have to compete for orders in the same market. Each is paying

the same wages and finds it hard enough to keep things going, competition being keen and profits low. One day a big order comes into the market, and rather than lose it or share it *B* agrees to fulfil it for 5 per cent. less than the prevailing price. As, however, this absorbs all the prospective profit, and as the works are run primarily to make profit, *B* cuts down wages to recoup himself for what he regards as his loss. But other buyers demand that prices for them shall be cut 5 per cent. also. Now under these circumstances what is *A* to do? He may refuse to lower prices and wages, and in process of time see his works standing idle, whilst *B's* are increasing in size, or he may follow *B's* lead and cut down prices and wages also. The illustration is neither exaggerated or overdrawn. It represents what is occurring every day. But if it be correct, how is it possible for "Christian employers to give to their workmen what is necessary not only to relieve the pressure of existence, but to make work and life enjoyable?" Employers whose business is not a practical monopoly are at the mercy of the most unscrupulous of their number, which again raises the question of whether that is a Christian system in which the selfish rule and the good are compelled to follow the bad?

THE WAY OUT.

So far as I can see there are but two ways of escape from this condition of affairs. One is for the employers in a given industry to combine together, merge all their conflicting interests into one common interest, and form what is known as a Trust, in other words a Monopoly. By this method they avoid competing one with the other, and are able to say to buyers, As you cannot buy what you want anywhere else save

from us, you must pay the price we ask or go without. That, as a rule, is a very desirable state of things for those who have shares in the trust. But what about the consumer? Unprotected by the free play of competition in the open markets, he is at the mercy of a concern over which he has no control, and the one object of which is to make dividends, for which, in the very nature of things, the demand must be an ever-increasing one. Clearly such a state of things must be bad for the consumer. And what of the workman? The employer who manages his own business is brought into direct and personal relations with his workpeople, with whom he is compelled to maintain more or less of a human relationship. But that is out of the question under the trust. The "employer" here is a corporate body composed of hundreds of people of whose very names the workman is ignorant. There is a general manager or superintendent, and under him, in descending degrees, a small army of officials, until finally the foreman is reached, who has charge of some small squad. But the foreman has nothing to do in these large establishments with either wages or conditions of employment. His business is to see that the men under him do the work properly for which they are being paid. He is simply a "driver" who is sometimes paid by results. And so the whole concern is run as if it were a piece of machinery, of which the workmen were the cogs in the wheel. Everything savouring of a human relationship is destroyed. The machine must be kept going to grind out dividends, even if every generous impulse and kindly aspiration be crushed to nothingness.

AND WHAT IS THE ALTERNATIVE?

Socialism. It is not enough to say that the trust is coming; the trust has come. And it

has come to stay. Competition is dead, and monopoly is already on the throne ruling the market in which human life is being bought and sold. Every commodity is produced at the cost of so much of that energy and brain power which go to the making of human existence. What is the end of all labour, of all useful human effort? Is it not that we may live? Can any other reason be given? If, then, the end of all industry be that man may obtain the wherewithal to live, is not Socialism the better way? Under Socialism there would still be monopoly, as in the case of the trust, but with this difference: that whereas the trust is privately owned and run exclusively with the object of making profit, under Socialism land and capital would be owned in common by the entire community, and be controlled and operated and cultivated so as to produce the end in view—the supply of the necessaries of life—with the least expenditure of human effort. Take, for example, the waterworks of a great city. These as a rule belong to the city, and every effort is made to ensure that the supply is abundant, pure, and economical. Here producers and consumers are one and the same set of persons—the citizens. As the citizens are supplying themselves, they naturally see that they do it well. They have no motive for adulterating the supply or stinting it; self-interest, in fact, impels them in quite the other direction. Why cannot the same rule of production be applied to bread and clothing and houses? That it should is what Socialism proposes.

THE KINGDOM OF GOD.

Christ laid down no elaborate system of either economics or theology. No great teacher

ever did. His heart beat in sympathy with the great human heart of the race. His words are simple and not to be misunderstood when taken to mean what they say. His prayer—Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven—was surely meant to be taken literally. Are our opponents prepared to assert that in Heaven there will be factories working women and children for starvation wages; coal mines, and private property in land, dividing the population of Heaven into two classes, one revelling in riches and luxury, destructive of soul and body, the other grovelling in poverty, also destructive of all that is best in life? If not, how can they consistently support the system which inevitably produces that state of things upon earth?

A favourite text of the opponents of Socialism is, "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you." But that, strangely enough, is also a favourite text of mine. Will our opponents descend from the clouds of meaningless words with which they becloud the sense of this text and tell us what they mean by the "kingdom of God and His righteousness," and what those "things" are which are to be added to those who become members thereof? This nation is being done to death by war-mongers and money-grabbers. A lying spirit is abroad in the land; poverty does not decrease; children are hungered; drunkenness is rampant; gambling is on the increase, and discontent is growing. Are these the fruits of the Spirit, the "things" of the kingdom of God? Unless the way of life be found, the future is black with the gloom of the pit. What is the kingdom of God? The question is put in no frivolous spirit; it is the one question which must be answered if we, as a nation, are to be

saved from destruction. Believe, says the preacher; believe and act, says the Socialist. Shew us thy faith without thy works, and we will shew you our faith by our works. Which of these methods make most for the realisation of the kingdom of God?

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